

RES MEDICA

Journal of the Royal Medical Society



The Society's Library

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Abstract

Amongst all the inventions, attainments and discoveries which have marked Man's strange progression from Darwinian prehistory to this modern, hectic but stimulating civilisation, the realisation of his ability to communicate his thoughts and ideas in permanent form must rank extremely high. Few will deny that the discovery of writing, the manufacture of paper and the invention of the printing press are among the greatest landmarks in human history. Certainly in Medicine we can consider books to be amongst the most useful and basic of the tools of our trade—for here we can draw upon the wisdom and learning of preceding ages and it is here that we have contact with the minds of those generations of our predecessors who have risen and passed away. We in this Society rightly value the traditions of our past and I make no apology in presenting briefly some facts and some thoughts on that greatest of our links with the past—and not only with the past but with the future as well—our Library. I should like to tell you something of its history and of its present state; I should like to whet your appetite for exploration by exhibiting a few of its treasures and I should like to evaluate the place of the Library in the Society's life, and its prospects for the future.

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ISSN: 2051-7580 (Online) ISSN: 0482-3206 (Print)

Res Medica is published by the Royal Medical Society, 5/5 Bristo Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9AL

Res Medica, Autumn 1958, 1(3): 12-16

[doi:10.2218/resmedica.v1i3.319](https://doi.org/10.2218/resmedica.v1i3.319)

THE SOCIETY'S LIBRARY

Based on a Dissertation read before the Royal
Medical Society on Friday, 28th February 1958.

By J. J. C. CORMACK

Amongst all the inventions, attainments and discoveries which have marked Man's strange progression from Darwinian prehistory to this modern, hectic but stimulating civilisation, the realisation of his ability to communicate his thoughts and ideas in permanent form must rank extremely high. Few will deny that the discovery of writing, the manufacture of paper and the invention of the printing press are among the greatest landmarks in human history. Certainly in Medicine we can consider books to be amongst the most useful and basic of the tools of our trade—for here we can draw upon the wisdom and learning of preceding ages and it is here that we have contact with the minds of those generations of our predecessors who have risen and passed away. We in this Society rightly value the traditions of our past and I make no apology in presenting briefly some facts and some thoughts on that greatest of our links with the past—and not only with the past but with the future as well—our Library. I should like to tell you something of its history and of its present state; I should like to whet your appetite for exploration by exhibiting a few of its treasures and I should like to evaluate the place of the Library in the Society's life, and its prospects for the future.

It is not surprising that a Society such as ours should have wished to acquire a representative collection of medical books. That it began to form its Library early is shown by the fact that sixteen years after the Society's formal foundation, in 1753, a library was being accumulated in the room set aside for the use of the Society in the old Royal Infirmary; books being purchased with funds which had previously paid for tavern accommodation. This room soon became inadequate; the Library being "not in such a situation as could be desired either with regard to conveniency or preservation." In 1755 the foundation stone of the new Hall was laid by the venerable Dr Cullen. This Hall, which is well known to us from Shepherd's engraving, stood in the south west corner of Surgeons Square—the site of which is now the courtyard of the Physics Department in Drummond Street. In 1778 the Society petitioned the King for a Royal Charter, and among their reasons for so doing they instanced "That the Society, by contributions of the Members have gradually made a collection of Medical Books, which is daily increasing . . ." This Charter was granted on 14th December 1778 and now stands in the Society's Hall.

In November 1852 the Society moved to its present premises. The old Medical Hall stood on ground which was needed for extension by the Managers of the Royal Infirmary, and after prolonged negotiations the Society sold the old Hall to the Infirmary for £1700 and moved to 7 Melbourne Place, which it was hoped would provide "full accommodation for the Library, now amounting to 14,000 volumes, selected with a care unexampled in any other institution."

Throughout the ensuing years the problems of sorting, listing and cataloguing the Society's books presented constant worries to each successive Library Committee. Our earliest extant copy of a catalogue is one published in 1812, and the one which is most up to date, and by which this Library is known elsewhere, was published in 1895. Continually efforts were being made to carry on with cataloguing and indexing the Society's volumes, but

the struggle was an uphill one and repeated agonised appeals to members for help in this work seemed to be of little avail.

A great step forward was taken in 1937 when the room opposite the Bramwell Room was renovated and set aside for our oldest and most valued books (including the Dissertations) as a memorial to J. R. Young. A further most shrewd and progressive step was taken in 1956, under the Librarianship of J. G. Birkbeck, when some 1000 works of non-medical interest, having been vetted beforehand, were alienated and sold for a gratifyingly large sum of which a proportion was invested for the use of the Library Committee and the remainder used for some much-needed redecorating.

The present time sees the start of a new venture; with the generous financial assistance of the Carnegie Trust we have been able to obtain expert help in the much-needed work of re-cataloguing the Library. The devoted skill of Miss Wingate has already accomplished a large part of this mammoth task. With this work in hand, and with the newly established appointment of an Honorary Librarian to act as "guide, philosopher and friend" to successive Librarians, thus ensuring a measure of continuity, the Library would seem to be taking on a new lease of life.

What does this, our present Library, comprise? Approximately speaking some 11,700 volumes, falling roughly into the following seven categories:

1. Dissertations—215.
2. Record books.
3. Old and rare books (16th, 17th and 18th Centuries)—704.
4. 19th and early 20th Century monographs and text books—3538.
5. Out-of-date editions of current textbooks—325.
6. Current textbooks—183.
7. Journals—3545.

Amidst all these there are books of unique interest to the Society because of their connection, either by authorship or presentation, with our own members, past and present.

Space does not permit me even to review the cream of this collection—it must suffice for me to say that the whole sweep of medical history, and more, the history of our own Society, is mirrored here—from the early fathers Hippocrates, Aristotle, Galen, Celsus and Avicenna, through Vesalius, Eustachius, Harvey, Willis, Cullen and Boerhaave, the Monros and the Hunters, Simpson, Syme and Lister, down to the most modern authors. To illustrate but two of our treasures we have here a page from the works of Ambroise Paré—a truly fascinating volume from the pen of the father of modern surgery and a giant among men; and this rare link with the discovery of digitalis—Withering's "Account of the Foxglove" with its inscription to the Society.

We should be proud to possess these volumes, but at the same time we must be aware of the problems which face us in our responsibility for caring for these treasures and also ensuring that the Library gives the best possible service to members.

It will probably be clear from what I have already said that the major interest of this Society's Library is a historical one. For many years now it has been the case that the Society has been unable to keep a stock of current textbooks which can be lent out to members. This type of service is provided by our subscription to Messrs Ferriers Lending Library, and with the increasing speed with which new textbooks or new editions of old textbooks are being published, I do not think that the Society will ever again be in a position to organise any large-scale lending library facilities of its own. It may well be that if the Society increases its membership we should augment our already overburdened subscription to Ferriers.

This lending service is supplemented by the current textbooks available in the Consultation Press. It is imperative that this section of our Library should be kept as up to date as possible, and indeed that it should be enlarged as soon as financial circumstances permit. Ideally it should contain an entire collection of the standard textbooks and books of reference currently in use at this School. This ideal has not been fulfilled, but it should certainly be our aim. We should also aim to have the older books which we possess in proper order, and in such a state that members will be able to find any particular volume with ease. Members should also be able to browse through some of the books which have been written and read by their predecessors without running the risk of covering themselves with the dust of ages or having precious tomes disintegrate in their hands.

Obviously the major work of re-cataloguing is the first step towards restoring the Library to its rightful usefulness. Work has already started. How is it to proceed? First of all the volumes in each room must be classified, as far as the limitations of the shelving will allow, into subjects—this is the work which is proceeding just now in the North Library—then the major task of completing the card-index author catalogue and the subject-index will begin.

When this preliminary work is completed the Library Committee and the Society will be faced with important decisions concerning the alienation of books. We have quite a number of duplicate volumes on the Library's shelves which should almost certainly be sold. There are also in many cases numerous editions of popular textbooks—in these instances it might be best to keep copies of the earliest and latest editions and discard the remainder. On these issues it may be relatively easy to decide, but more difficult problems of alienation present themselves. Many of our books are written in a language no longer understood by the majority of medical students—namely Latin. We have also some works in Greek and a considerable number in French and German. How many of these are worth keeping? Obviously it will be for the Society to decide at a later date; personally I feel that many of the medical classics of the 16th and 17th centuries should be most carefully preserved and cherished, and if possible that they should be supplemented by English translations where such are available. Even if their content is not fully understood they illustrate the steps which have been taken from earliest times along the road of medical progress.

However, it is more doubtful whether many of our 18th and 19th century German and French works are really of much value to the Society either for instruction or for interest. Some, though not all of them, may well be taking up space on the shelves when they could serve better purpose by being sold and providing money for much-needed improvements. We also possess odd incomplete sets of Journals of doubtful value and their alienation too will require to be considered. But I must emphasise that it would be the utmost folly to consider such pruning of our collection before all the books are listed and indexed, and when the time comes we shall certainly need to obtain the most expert advice. Too often in the past zeal and enthusiasm have outrun discretion, and sound schemes have been defeated by precipitate action.

After we have decided what we wish to discard and what to retain, in the light of the value of the main bulk of the Library to the Society as an historical collection which mirrors both the history of medicine and the history of the Society, the next step will be to decide on the proper lay-out of the Library.

Once a decision is made on this, books will have to be shifted to conform. This may mean large scale upheavals, but it will be worth doing if the job is to be properly completed. This finished, permanent shelf marks



Title page of Withering's *Account of the Foxglove* which he donated to the Royal Medical Society.



Page from the Collected Works of Ambroise Paré showing restitution of dislocated shoulder.

can be allocated to books and the catalogue then completed. As far as possible the books in the North Library and Museum would be in logical categories, but the provision of shelf marks would certainly mean that by using the catalogue any particular book could be rapidly traced. At this juncture the Society should be in possession of a complete card-index author catalogue and subject index of all its books. A decision will then have to be made on the publication of a revised catalogue to replace the 1896 edition. Owing to high costs of printing it might be advisable to restrain our ambition in this direction, but even a cyclestiled copy of an up-to-date author catalogue would be of value for the information of other libraries and interested bodies and for our own prestige, as well as its obvious use to members.

Once we have a catalogue it will be imperative that successive Librarians keep it up to date. As our rate of expansion is now not high (nor is it desirable that it should be) this task will probably not be very onerous, but it will be most important. With the appointment of an Honorary Librarian the problem of continuity should be at least partially solved.

However, even with our Library pruned, re-sorted and re-catalogued, we will still have further problems to face. The three most important of these are those of preservation, protection and access. A vast number of our older volumes are in a very bad state of repair—some of the more important were re-bound in 1937, but many are still in a heart-breaking condition. The cost of binding is astronomical and it is unlikely that we will ever be able to afford to undertake a complete programme of this sort, but as a palliative measure we might be well advised to repair some of the less damaged volumes ourselves with adhesive tape. This is a practical step which falls short of perfection, but which might indeed save some of our volumes from a much worse state. The addresses in the metal box in the Young Room should also be bound, or at least placed in folders.

Allied to the problem of preservation is that of protection. Though untroubled by moth and rust we do have to contend with the awful ravages of dust, and I suspect that thieves break in. Even to-day books "walk" from our shelves and, though they may yet turn up, I am inclined to wonder where are our copies of Jenner, of Akenside's *De Dysenteria* inscribed "for Dr. Cullen from Dr. Hunter," or de Quincey's *Opium Eater* or Dover's *Ancient Physician*. These are treasures which are at present lost, and though they may have only strayed I fear it is more likely that they have been stolen. Most of our cases must perforce be locked, and with regard to the havoc already wrought by dust it is most desirable that they should be glass- or perspex-fronted. We have baulked at this latter problem before, but I feel that the time is now ripe for further investigation as to the cost of such a measure and we should give very serious consideration to ways and means. The locking of cases in turn raises the problem of access. Ideally any member should be at liberty to browse around the shelves. However, as past experience has shown this to be scarcely practicable, we must devise some scheme whereby books could be consulted at specified times or whereby keys could be "signed out" for limited periods. This again is not an easy problem, but it should not be beyond our ingenuity to solve it satisfactorily.

Finally, how is the Library to expand? We have already seen that rapid expansion is not possible on our limited budget, and it is probably not even desirable. We certainly should continue to build up our collection of Journals, and we should, perhaps, do more about filing pamphlets and reports, but we do constantly need new books of general medical interest and replacements for textbooks. The trickle of such books bought by the

Society is at the moment pitifully small. Some of our old members and friends (such as Dr Douglas Guthrie) from time to time present us with books, but I should like humbly to suggest that present members when they are about to relinquish active membership of the Society might like to present a book to the Library as a mark of their gratitude to the Society as a whole for the benefits they have obtained here—and if such presentation be made after consultation with the Library Committee as to present needs it would be of all the more value to the Society.

In attempting to give you some idea of the history and scope of our Library, and some of the problems which will face us in the future, I hope I have been able to show what a magnificent, but challenging heritage we have fallen heir to. In this Library we have our contacts with our own past and with the accumulated wisdom of centuries. The responsibilities for preserving and maintaining what is good and useful in this unique collection, while at the same time providing for intelligent expansion and progress, are grave, but we owe it to our predecessors and to our successors in this place to grasp the opportunity which now presents itself of consolidating and improving this most precious of our tangible assets—The Society's Library.

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